



Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) Framework And the Merced Wild and Scenic River

When you come to a muddy puddle in the trail, what do you do? If you are like most people, you probably walk around it. After 3 or 4 people have walked around the puddle, it invites others to follow this same path. After several weeks of side-stepping the puddle, a new trail has been cut.

What does the park do when these sorts of situations arise? Typically, the condition is reported to park staff and trail crews are dispatched to make any necessary repairs. But how does the park ultimately make sure that this sort of degradation is not allowed to occur? Sometimes the solution is as easy as posting an educational sign. Other times, an area may need a protective boardwalk to allow restoration to occur.

That is the essence of the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) framework—to assess the impacts of visitor use as a way to improve conditions for both future visitors and protect the natural and cultural resources of the park. In the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan*, the National Park Service adopts the VERP framework as a tool to protect and enhance the river's Outstandingly Remarkable Values, and to address user capacity in throughout the 81-miles of the Merced River corridor in Yosemite National Park.

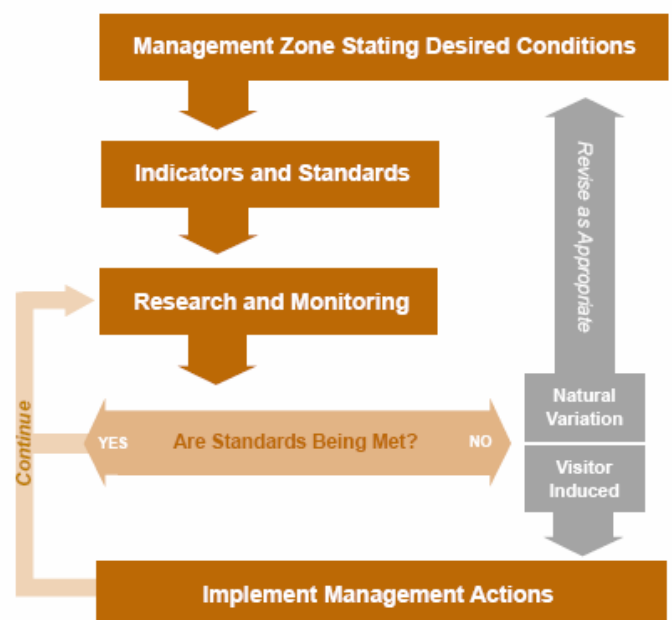
What is VERP?

The park's VERP program safeguards the quality of both park resources and the visitor experience. Simply put, VERP in Yosemite serves as a report card to measure how well the park is protecting and enhancing the Merced River's Outstandingly Remarkable Values. The park recently adopted a set of indicators and standards (through the VERP framework) to quantitatively monitor and maintain environmental and social conditions in the Merced River corridor. These prescriptions—coupled with a monitoring program—will give park managers the information and rationale needed to make sound, science-based decisions about the impacts associated with visitor use.

How does VERP work?

The VERP framework is an iterative process that

- 1) Establishes specific indicators—resource or visitor experience conditions that serve as early warning signs that too much use is occurring.
- 2) Develops measurable standards that determines how much is too much use.
- 3) Monitors each indicator and standard to ensure that the standard is not reached or exceeded.
- 4) Determines what (if any) action should be taken to limit use in order to improve conditions.



What are standards & indicators?

In the VERP model, measures of success are quantified through a series of **indicators** and **standards**.

An indicator presents a subject to be measured (e.g., water quality, campsite condition, social trails) and is monitored periodically to detect change.

A standard establishes the measurable threshold for the indicator (e.g., there would be no more than X number of social trails in a given area). When the standard is approached or exceeded, management action can be taken if monitoring indicates conditions are changing to an undesirable level.

The indicators and standards established through the VERP framework do not assume a one-to-one relationship between a resource value and a given standard and indicator. The standards and indicators developed for the Merced River corridor can, in some cases, glean information regarding the health of a number of river values.

For example, by monitoring the length of informal trails in meadows within Discovery (2B) and Day Use (2C) zones, resource managers are able to gain information regarding the condition of the following Outstandingly Remarkable Values:

1. The length and condition of informal trails is indicative of the contiguity and ecological health of meadows and wetland areas (part of the Biological Outstandingly Remarkable Value).
2. The length of informal trails in meadows could be indicative of impacts to wildlife habitat, including special-status species (Biological Outstandingly Remarkable Value).
3. Archeological sites and traditional gathering areas used by American Indian groups may exist in meadows, and could be affected by the proliferation of informal trails in meadows (Cultural Outstandingly Remarkable Values).
4. The extent of informal trails in meadows may affect visitor experience, as meadows are enjoyable areas in which to engage in a variety of river-related related recreational opportunities—including nature study, photography, etc. (Recreation Outstandingly Remarkable Value).
5. Informal trails may impact the scenic interface of river, rock, meadow, and forest; thus monitoring the length of informal trails in meadows contributes to the protection and enhancement of the Scenic Outstandingly Remarkable Values.

What happens if monitoring indicates that a standard is being exceeded?

If monitoring determines that management action is necessary, the public may have an opportunity to provide comments on the range of management actions proposed by the park. Depending on the action proposed, environmental compliance may be completed.

For example, if monitoring in a given meadow determines that the standard for the number and extent of informal trails is exceeded, the park might propose installation of a boardwalk or other protective measures. These proposals would be analyzed as part of a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document and presented to the public for review and comment.

For more information

- Consult the following documents
Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan
User Capacity Program for the Merced Wild and Scenic River Corridor
- Check out fact sheets on the park's planning web site at www.nps.gov/yose/planning
- Review the list of VERP indicators and standards adopted for monitoring in 2004
- Review the Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS which presents a new list of indicators and standards to be monitored in 2005.
- Attend one of the park's monthly open houses to learn more about VERP and speak with